



NCO's bravery in truck fire honored

BY JENNIFER E. WEST

Nucleus staff writer

Fire and water, A deadly mix of fire and water during a pouring rain on Interstate 65. Plumes of smoke and flames from a delivery truck that had plunged down an embankment. The truck driver's screams. Running to help the driver get free and, in the process, getting burned.

Those are the highlights of a heroic but unsuccessful act of bravery by a TEAM KIRTLAND member on temporary duty at Maxwell AFB, Ala., in November.

Senior Master Sgt. James H. Foltz' heroic act was honored with an Air Force Commendation Medal, First Oak Leaf Cluster presented by Col. Henry L. Andrews, Jr., 377th Air Base Wing commander, in a ceremony Feb. 17.

Sergeant Foltz, traveling with Chief Master Sgts. Paul D. Helphenstine and Alan DeRosa and Lt. Col. Mark Koopman to an event at the Senior NCO Academy, said he wasn't even thinking before racing to try to help the driver from the flaming vehicle.

Although someone at the scene had called 911 for help, none of the other observers of the accident were responding to the trapped driver's cries because of the fire.

Sergeant Foltz believes the driver was trapped by his seatbelt because of the angle of the truck. He called to the driver, hoping to calm the man enough to allow him to free himself from the belt, as he raced to the rear of the truck that was in flames. Sergeant Foltz' hope was that the driver would sustain only burns, however serious, but be able to exit the truck alive from the back of the vehicle.

Senior Master Sgt. James H. Foltz, 377th Medical Group first sergeant, holds the Air Force Commendation Medal he received for his heroic actions.

The driver, unfortunately, was too disoriented and unable to free himself, and ultimately lost his life when the truck exploded.

"That was the hottest thing I've ever felt," Sergeant Foltz described grabbing open the rear doors of the truck. His hands were burned and torn to the bone sometime between skidding down the embankment using a vine and landing in front of the truck's burning grill.

One of his companions, Chief Helphenstine, painted a picture of the Airman in Air Force shoes and light blue jacket ready for nothing more strenuous than first sergeant duty.

"His uniform was trashed and his hands bloodied, face sooty," Chief Helphenstine said. "He was soaked to the bone and smelled like hell."

Chief Helphenstine serves at the 58th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron.

As if a burning vehicle weren't enough, Chief Helphenstine said in the driving rain and dark, with people yelling at Sergeant Foltz, an eastbound train was on a track within five feet of the fire, fanning the flames and smoke beyond any visibility.

As emergency vehicles approached, the travelers realized they could offer no further assistance for the lost driver. Now, they needed to care for their own injured Airman.

Sergeant Foltz explains his past career in the medical field surely played a role in his reflex response to the emergency situation. And, his action, he said is simply typical of the type of people in the Air Force who serve others.

Sergeant Foltz serves as the 377th Medical Group first sergeant, handling a different set of emergencies than medical problems.

Sergeant Foltz said his now-scarred hands are healed, and he credits and thanks his traveling companions for taking charge of his medical emergency.